

The True Dhamma Has Disappeared

November 29, 2014

The Dhamma—the Dhamma as the truth—is something that’s always in the world. In one of the suttas that we chant, the Buddha says that whether Tathagathas arise or don’t arise, there are truths that are always true across the board: All fabrications are inconstant, all fabrications are stressful, all dhammas are not-self. Those things are always true.

But teachings about the Dhamma are not always here. As the Buddha foresaw, his teachings would disappear. He called that the disappearance of the saddhamma, the disappearance of the true Dhamma. He knew that it would have to happen, just as it happened to the true Dhamma taught by all the Buddhas of the past.

What’s interesting is how he defines the disappearance of the true Dhamma. He says that when counterfeit Dhamma appears, the true Dhamma disappears, in the same way that when counterfeit money appears, true money disappears. Think about that for a minute. The simple existence of counterfeit money doesn’t mean that there’s no true money out there. It simply means that you’ve got to be very careful. You can’t blindly trust your money any more. You can’t just take it out of your pocket and use it to buy things. You have to examine it carefully. And you can’t accept money from just anybody. You’ve got to test it.

The same is true when counterfeit Dhamma appears. Think about what it was like when the Buddha was awakened and there were arahants all over northern India. You could listen to their Dhamma and trust it. There are suttas in the Canon where a person asks a series of questions of one of the Buddha’s disciples and then goes to the Buddha, asks the same questions, and gets precisely the same answers. That’s what it was like when the true Dhamma had not yet disappeared. The Dhamma was always consistent.

Now, though, there are so many contradictory versions of the Dhamma available that the true Dhamma has obviously disappeared. In fact, it disappeared a long time ago, when other versions of the Dhamma appeared in India, in particular, the teaching that phenomena don’t really arise or pass away, that their arising and passing away is just an illusion. That teaching was formulated about 500 years after the Buddha passed away, within the same time frame he gave for the disappearance of the true Dhamma. Since that time, many more contradictory versions of the Dhamma have appeared, to the point where teachings that contradict one another are a major hallmark of Buddhism in the popular mind.

You may remember the story from the Canon of the blind men and the elephant. Originally, it was used to describe sectarians of other religions and the fact that their grasp of the Dhamma was very partial at best. One blind man feels the elephant’s trunk and says that the elephant’s like a hose. Another one feels the tail and says, ah, the elephant’s like a broom. Then they fight over whether the elephant’s like a hose or a broom. Well, in the Chinese version of this story, the blind men represent, not sectarians of other religions, but Buddhist teachers. Everyone’s take on the Dhamma, whether they’re Buddhist or not is, according to this version, partial. That’s what happens when true Dhamma disappears: Every version of the Dhamma gets regarded as counterfeit. When people get used to counterfeit Dhamma, then even when they encounter true Dhamma, it sounds counterfeit to them.

But from the Buddha’s perspective, even when counterfeit Dhamma has arisen, there are still some versions of the Dhamma that are true. You simply have to learn how to recognize what’s true and what’s counterfeit, and watch out for any counterfeit that comes your way. And you have to be especially insistent in drawing a line between what’s true and what’s not. We can’t simply say, “Well, let’s all agree that everybody’s Dhamma is okay. That way we can get along without arguing.” That would be like saying that all money, whether true or counterfeit, is equal. But it’s not. If the money’s counterfeit and you take it back to the Treasury, they won’t accept it. If you practice counterfeit Dhamma, you won’t get to the end of suffering. It simply won’t work.

It's like Ajaan Chah's simile of salt and sand. We could get people to agree that sand is salt, and for the purposes of discussion, sand would then be salt. But you couldn't use the sand to make your food salty. Agreeing that something is something else may help us get along, but it doesn't make it act like something else. Our agreeing on something doesn't make it true.

So you've got to be really careful. In some cases, counterfeit Dhamma is pretty obviously counterfeit. I was recently reading someone saying that the Buddha was so down on sex and lust because he had spent too much time with his austerities. Now, back in the days of the Buddha, that opinion would have been laughed out of the Sangha. But the sad truth is that at present, there are people who are happy to give it credence. Even obviously false Dhamma isn't all that obvious to some, especially when it panders to their defilements.

There's a story about a novice staying out in the woods, and a prince, Prince Jayasena, comes along, walking for exercise in the morning. The prince says to the novice, "I'd like to ask you a question." Now, this novice apparently had already had some experience dealing with Prince Jayasena, because he responds, "Ah, I'd rather not answer your question because you wouldn't understand the answer." And the prince says, "Well, I might." So the novice says, "Okay, I'll answer your question, but don't argue, okay?" The prince says, "Okay. The question is this: I understand that there are monks who have overcome sensual desire. Is this true?" And the novice says, "Yes, it is." And the prince says, "That's not possible" and walks away.

The novice then goes and reports his conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "You fool. You can't teach that teaching to the prince. There's no way he's going to understand it. He's too blind." In other words, back in that day, people understood what blindness was. Nowadays they don't. They take their blindness and advertise it as a perceptive insight.

That's a relatively obvious case. A lot of other cases, though, are not quite so obvious. This means that as you listen to the Dhamma or look for a teacher, you have to be extra careful—and especially careful about your motivation for choosing one version of the Dhamma over another. Don't go for something just because it makes you feel good.

Remember the two qualities that the Buddha looked for in a student. The first is that you be really honest, and particularly honest about your own failings and weaknesses. The second is that you be observant. You watch things carefully. Try to look for the telltale signs that show what's true Dhamma and what's not, both in other people and in yourself—but primarily in yourself, because that's where it's easiest to be fooled. If you aren't honest and observant about yourself, it's going to be hard to be honest and observant about other people. Your own blind spots will help you miss the blind spots in other people as well. So you have to be extra, extra careful as you practice.

I know in my own case, studying with Ajaan Fuang, I thought that by the time I started studying with him, I had pretty much already tamed my own pride. But he found instances of my pride that I hadn't seen and dug them out to show to me. That was a real gift. I didn't like seeing those things, I didn't like having them pointed out, but I learned and benefited from the experience.

He had another student, someone who was really nice, very polite, extremely helpful to other people, but deep down inside she believed that she was a non-returner. Now, Ajaan Fuang tried to get the message through to her in all kinds of ways that she wasn't, but she just blocked out his message. Something inside of her wanted to hold onto that so fiercely that she refused to hear the blatant messages he was sending her way. There was something inside her that wasn't quite observant, quite honest. And so she never learned the lesson.

So, now that the true Dhamma's disappeared in the Buddha's sense, we have to be very careful when we look for it. We have to test it as much as we can, test ourselves as much as we can. The teachings on mindfulness, the teachings on concentration and discernment: They're all there to make you a more reliable observer of what's going on in yourself, so that you can see cause and effect, so that you can see those truths of inconstancy, stress, and not-self and use them as tools.

When you get the mind really still and you think that everything is totally still and there's nothing going on in there, watch, look, be very careful, be very discerning. You think you've gone beyond time and space? Well, look around. Is there any inconstancy in that state of mind? Any little blips here or there? If there's a blip, what goes along with the blip? That's inconstancy. It's telling you that there's something fishy going on in here. Look for the cause. If there's any rise or fall in the level of stress, something's going on. It may be quick, it may be subtle, and as I've said, you've got to be extra, extra careful in this time, now that the true Dhamma has disappeared. In other words, it's not obviously everywhere. You have to be very selective.

So try to develop your honesty and your powers of observation. Try to develop your mindfulness, alertness, your ardency: the quality that says, in Ajaan Mun's words, "I don't want to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again." Greed, aversion, delusion, pride: These things have been laughing at us for a long, long time. And over the centuries, they've managed to create a lot of counterfeit Dhamma to make it even harder for us to ferret things out, to recognize them for what they are. So, this throws you back on your own honesty and integrity. You've got to be really selective, very discerning. Develop the qualities that can make you selective and discerning. And that will allow you to find the true Dhamma that's still there.